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ABSTRACT

This document reports on an empirical investigation of anti-women humor appearing in the Reader's Digest over three decades, revealing the operation of an unconscious sexist ideology. A systematic analysis was made of 1,069 jokes appearing in two featured columns of the Reader's Digest for the two-year periods 1947-48, 1957-58, and 1967-68. Scoring rules guided categorizing of jokes into anti-women, anti-men and non-sex-related groupings. Results of the analysis were: (1) since the 1940's six times as many anti-women jokes appeared as did anti-male jokes; (2) in the period after WWII, more than a quarter of all the humor in these magazine columns was directed against women; (3) the percentage of sexist jokes has declined steadily over three decades; and (4) the portrait of the typical woman has not changed over the past 30 years according to the content of sexist jokes. In rank order of prevalence of traits, the female joke subject is: (1) stupid, incompetent or foolish; (2) domineering over men; (3) exploitive of men for money; (4) jealous and catty; (5) irresponsible with money; (6) gossipy and nagging; and (7) overly-anxious to catch a husband. (Author/PC)

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Sexism Springs Eternal--in The Reader's Digest

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Sexism, like all prejudice, once formed is difficult to change. In trying to understand why prejudiced attitudes are so hardy and resistant to counter-forces, social psychologists have tended to emphasize their emotional, motivational component, as well as the "irrational" elements which somehow become central in the personality dynamics of the prejudiced person.

Such thinking extends the fatherly wisdom we note in Lord Chesterfield's Letters to his Son (April 13, 1752):

> "Our prejudices are our mistresses; reason is at best our wife, very often heard indeed, but seldom minded."

It has also characterized several decades of research on the authoritarian personality. Psychologists who witnessed the mass conversion of an entire Nation's beliefs and values, fled from Nazism and sought to explain such phenomena in terms of child-rearing patterns which created repressed hostility and sexuality in particular types of people.

This is a typical research strategy of many psychologists: namely, to observe a social movement, a complex, interacting system supported by economics, law, politics, history and coercive forces, and then to ignore the forest in search of the individual tree responsible for "the problem."

In doing so, they have inadvertently become part of the repressive machinery of the state which seeks the solution for its problems by identifying "the problem people" responsible for them. Such has been the way psychologists have used IQ tests to root out the feeble minded among us, to identify those aliens who threaten the status quo by appearing to be different and then recommending legislation to restrict their immigration, or to sterilize them to prevent proliferation of their "problem children."

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Thus we have been blinded to the power of social systems which define reality, relevance and appropriateness for all of us, while in the pursuit of scientific psychology we put the behavior of individuals under our analytic microscope.

Prejudices among young children are as easily modified by new information as they are formed. Not so among adults. We believe along with Sandra and Daryl Bem (1970) that the basis for sexism and many other prejudices is a set of assumptions and beliefs about the way the world and people "really" are. This nonconscious ideology does not start as a malicious intention to harm others, but as a set of rational propositions about the nature of reality. For example, everyone "knows" that men are generally taller than women, that women can bear children and men cannot but people also "know" that women are less logical and more emotional than men, and they are also likely to be bad drivers, nags, catty and spendthrifts.

The evidence for the first of these beliefs about biological differences comes from empirically validated observations. But so does the "evidence" for the latter beliefs we would all call "prejudiced."

The child learns about these sex-role differences from observing otherwise reliable cultural sources of information--parents, textbooks, television programming, newspapers, and magazines, among others. If the message transmitted across all of these diverse channels of communication is consistent, then there is no reason to question that it is a statement of fact and not of opinion or biased perspective. As evidence of reality, it goes unchallenged, becomming part of an ideology which then selectively guides subsequent processing of relevant information to accomodate it to these established "truths" or schemata. The more extensive is the support for such beliefs in one's society, the more they become part of the person's basic cognitive orientation to processing subsequent information. The bias is in the way we distort such information given the cognitive set we have established about the issue.

Such beliefs are resistant to change precisely because they are perceived not as attitudes, opinions or personal preferences but to the effect they are accepted as cognitive dimensions of reality.

We may differ in our opinions about whether a red shirt is appropriate to wear to an academic convention--and we may recognize each other's right to a personal preference on the matter. But what if you were told that the person wore that shirt because blue was his/her favorite color? That disagreement you could not tolerate because it would mean that if the other person was correct then some of your thinking, perception or your labelling process must be wrong. You assume you know what blue is, what red is, and can distinguish between them--and it is important to do so. Not because of your personality dynamics or some motivational constellation, but because your construction of reality is threatened by such disagreement.

So too, we believe is the way sexism and racism operate, once inculcated by those who control informational inputs to us.

TV commercials present a view of housebound women obsessed by the need to have their husband's shirts whiter than white, their family's underarms kissing sweet and everyone's delicate skin caressed by two-ply toilet tissue. With these pressing demands, how could they be expected to be concerned about war, politics, civil rights, economic recessions and other problems with which the men folk have to deal? The often zany heroine of TV serials proves how incompetent and foolish she is whenever she ventures forth into the real world of business; she does so at the risk of destroying her marriage, being unloved, or if happy then unsuccessful in business.

But the message that comes across the TV tube is well reinforced by that which comes across in the textbooks the child must read in school. While men build, create, control, roam, seek, achieve and receive societal acclaim, the girls and women have little freedom of choice or action, being merely passive foils for male action. It could be argued that textbooks only describe

the social reality available in the child's world, girls are being prepared for the future reality of being housewives and mothers. But boys, instead of being prepared for their future reality of becoming used-car salesmen, mail clerks and janitors, are portrayed in these texts as risking their lives in exciting adventures and engaging in heroic exploits which their real-life parents would never allow.

It is remarkable how blatantly distorted "reality" becomes in the hands of the textbook writer. A sixth-grade text, Into New Worlds, shows one female and three male scientists. While their work requires originality and tremendous mental effort, what about hers?

> "The project the young woman is working on is not her own idea. She was assigned to work on it....As an employee working on someone else's idea, she is typical of thousands of scientists working in industry today." (U'Ren, 1970)

In these educational readers, which help children construct their socially approved views of reality, when a story is humorous, the female is typically the butt of the joke. It is the shrill, nagging wife of an inventor who is dumped into the garbage by one of his robots; the fat, selfish queen bloats herself with ice cream while the skinny king gets none; and in another story a man who accidentally makes money from having killed his wife unintentionally, inspires his townsmen to also "bump off their old wives."

What happens when these biased attitudes face the test of reality after the children grow up and are no longer dominated by their textbooks, but free to read and see anything they want? The answer is simple--they continue to get more of the same misrepresentation from a variety of sources. However, it is when sexism comes dressed as humor that it may be most effective. The joke by its very nature is not intended to be taken seriously, so one becomes boorish for criticizing its social commentary. It is told usually in a friendly context with the intention of creating a positive emotional response, laughter, in the listener; one becomes a "wet blanket" for refusing to laugh

simply because the butt of the joke happens to be a woman or an ethnic type. If a joke is funny, it gets disseminated rapidly by word of mouth as well as reprinted in the press to an unbelievably wide audience. Also contributing to its effectiveness as an agent of bigotry is the liklihood that the recipient of a good joke will then become the sender in a joke-telling-transmission-chain. It is not uncommon to hear Jews telling anti-Semitic jokes, Poles telling anti-Polish jokes, Newfoundlanders telling anti-"Newfie" jokes, women telling anti-woman jokes, and Black comedians putting down Blacks.

We believe that one potent source of informational input to the creation and maintenance of the nonconcious ideology of sexism comes from the portrayal of women as the butt of humor in our mass media.

In this preliminary investigation we merely wanted to establish: the extent to which sexist humor abounds in our mass media; its variation over the recent decades, and the kind of portrait of the average woman that emerges from a content analysis of jokes about women.

We therefore turned to the Reader's Digest as our Sexist Source Book. Because the Digest has humor columns which it has featured regularly for several decades, it is possible to analyze historical changes changes in the prevalence of anti-woman jokes. All of its humor pieces are drawn from other mass media sources and thus, evidence for sexism would reflect not only bias in selection on the part of the Digest's editors but also the prejudices of writers and editors of magazines and newspapers throughout the country-which feed their bigotry into the Reader's Digest.

With its remarkable readership of over 29 million, the Digest reaches into the homes of middle America, the blind, with its Braille edition, and even the foreign-born, with its 13 foreign-language editions. Its formula of presenting a potpourri of articles and special features which are "not too heavy, not too light, just right" puts readers in a rather receptive mood to attend to, but not be too critical of its contents. In short, if there is a significant

percentage of anti-women jokes in the Reader's Digest we can be sure that a great many people have been affected by them both in their original format and as retold in the Digest.

Over 1,000 jokes were analyzed for the existence of anti-women and anti-men humor in two humor columns of the Digest: "Laughter is the Best Medicine" and "Cartoon Quips," for the years 1947-48, 1957-58 and 1967-68. Two independent scorers showed high reliability in being able to sort a sample of 500 jokes into anti-men,-women or neuter categories according to our explicit scoring rules. An anti-woman joke was defined as one in which: a) the way women (as a general class) act, feel or think is portrayed in stereotyped, derogatory ways; b) the impact of the joke depends entirely upon its subject being a woman since substituting a man would make it less funny or not funny at all; c) the subject is explicitly identified as female; d) the "punch line" or main thrust of the joke involves the negative characterization, rather than having it occur in some peripheral aspect of the joke; e) the subject is not a child (to avoid confounding with jokes relying on assumptions about children); f) the stereotyped attitude expressed is attributed to the subject's being a woman and not to special situational circumstances, or membership in other reference groups (except that of wife or mother). The reason for this last qualification is to make the criterion for inclusion relatively specific to just being a woman and not, for example, to being a woman of a given ethnic group, or a woman under extreme emotional tension or excitement.

In the process of establishing scoring rules and representative instances of each one, it became clear that there were also some jokes which could be classified as anti-male according to these same general rules: "One woman to another: 'my husband is absolutely no good at fixing anything, so everything in our house works.'"

"Wife, pointing to husband stretched out in hammock explains to friend, 'Jack's hobby is letting birds watch him.'"

The major finding from this analysis is that six times as many anti-women as anti-men jokes appeared in the Reader's Digest over the past 3 decades. In "Cartoon Quips" 15% of all the humor was anti-women, 3% was anti-men. In "Laughter is the Best Medicine" the percentages were 10 to 1 against women.

More remarkable is that in the period after World War II, 37%of all the jokes in one of these features and nearly a quarter of all those in the other, were attacks upon the intelligence, capability, integrity and motivation of women! Thus a reader would find internal consistency in going from the humor in "Cartoon Quips" to the humor in "Laughter is the Best Medicine"--a consistency provided by accepting assumptions about the inadequacies, if not the inferiority, of women.

The historical trend, however, also clearly reveals the steadily declining percentage of total jokes which reflect anti-woman sentiments. The lowered absolute level of sexism is an encouraging trend, to be sure, but even in the late sixties, still 10 percent of the humor in "Cartoon Quips" involved negative female stereotypes and an unfavorable ratio of anti-female to anti-male jokes was still being maintained.

But what is the portrait of the average woman that a visitor from outer space would get from reading the Reader's Digest? Over all years sampled, the rank ordering of the frequency of negative traits attributed to women has remained the same. They are in order from most to least frequent:

(1) Stupid, incompetent, foolish--("Sweet young thing to husband: 'Of course, I know what's going on in the world! I just don't understand any of it, that's all.'"

(2) Domineering men, getting their own way--("A woman was helping her husband pick out a new suit. After much disagreement, she finally said, 'Well, go ahead and please yourself. After all, you're the one who will wear the suit!' 'Well dear,' said the man meekly, 'I

figure I'll probably be wearing the coat and vest anyway.'"

(3) Exploiting men for their money. (--"Woman trying on hat to salesgirl: 'It's nice, but, it's a little less than he can afford.'")

(4) Jealous of and catty about other woman.--("at a party, one woman called across the room to another: 'I have been wondering, my dear, why you weren't invited to the Asterbilts last week? The other woman smiled: 'Isn't that a coincidence?' she said. 'I was just wondering why you were.'")

(5) Spendthrift or irresponsible with money. (--"Husband to guest: 'The decor is Helen's own blend of traditional, modern and twenty-five hundred dollars.'")

(6) Spreading gossip, nagging. (--"One woman to another: 'I like her. She just gives you the straight gossip, without slanting or editorializing.'")

(7) Manhunting, overanxious to marry. (--"A young innocent was asked by a professor why she had selected the college she did. 'Well,' she said, 'I came here to get went with, but I ain't yet.'")

(8) Miscellaneous, other (such as, weak, sentimental, overemotional, irrational, overly enthusiastic, poor sense of organization).

Curiously, the portrait is filled with contradictions so far as female-male relationships are concerned. Dumb, incompetent, irresponsible women who need men to put a light bulb in a socket or to park their cars, dominate the male of the species, exploit him and lead him meekly off to the alter. It may be that these stereotyped contradictions also tell us something about the real confusion surrounding the prevailing conception of what a woman's role should

be in society, but it may also be that the contradictory stereotypes perpetuated in this sexist humor contribute directly to the confusion that appears to exist. Nevertheless, we must recognize that such prejudiced beliefs came packaged for us by men in the most powerful positions we know-those that control the information we are exposed to.

While sources like the Digest cater to whatever their readership is assumed to pay for-and even include women's lib articles, right below a recent excerpt on the women's rights movement there was an innocuous filler item--interestingly titled: Eyewitness.

"Eyewitness--one father doubts that his teen-age daughter's tour of Europe impressed her much: 'All she remembers is that Mona Lisa needed more eye shadow.'" (July, 1970, p. 118)

It is time psychologists took a new look at the power structure which defines right and wrong for us because then they might stop following Lord Chesterfield's advice and heed the wisdom of Thomas Paine, who reminds us:

> "No man is prejudiced in favor of a thing knowing it to be wrong. He is attached to it on the belief of its being right."
>
> The Rights of Man, 1791.

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TABLE 1

Feature: "CARTOON QUIPS"

	Total Jokes	Percentage: Anti-Women	Anti-Men
1947-1948	59	37%	4%
1957-1958	160	11%	4%
1967-1968	184	10%	2%
Totals	403	15%	3%

Feature: "LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE"

	Total Jokes	Percentage: Anti-Women	Anti-Men
1947-1948	138	24%	4%
1957-1958	242	10%	1%
1967-1968	286	4%	.04%
Totals	666	10%	1%
Grand Total	1069	12%	2%